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The Online Beat by JOHN NICHOLS

Against the Hijacking of Patriotism

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"In all good conscience, I cannot and will not vote for a resolution that supports and endorses a failed policy that led us to war," declared US Rep. John Lewis, D-Georgia, as he explained why he could not join most members of Congress in backing what Republican leaders on the House of Representatives cynically described as a simple "support our troops" resolution.

The resolution, which passed the House by an overwhelming margin Friday morning, did express support for soldiers who have been ordered into combat in Iraq, and for the families of young men and women who wear the uniform of the United States in a time of war. But those sentiments came wrapped in a highly partisan expression of "unequivocal support . . . for [President Bush's] firm leadership and decisive action in the conduct of military operations in Iraq." After a failed attempt by House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-California, to extract the more extreme cheerleading language – perhaps by paralleling the more reasoned wording of the resolution that passed the Senate 99-1 on Thursday – the measure passed the House by a vote of 392-11, with 22 members voting "present."

Many of the House Democrats and Republicans who opposed the October "use of force" resolution that the administration used as justification for launching the war expressed discomfort with Friday's "unequivocal support" statement. But most, including Pelosi, backed it.

The bulk of the opposition to the measure came from members of the Congressional Black Caucus, such as Lewis, the civil rights movement hero who is frequently referred to as the conscience of the Congress. An angry U.S. Rep. John Conyers, D-Michigan, said, "I trust the American people to see through this attempt to coerce endorsement of his preventive war doctrine."

The ranking Democratic member of the House Judiciary Committee and the longest-serving African-American member of Congress, Conyers has been outspoken in expressing Constitutional concerns about the president's decision to

Every day in every city and town across America, progressives get up in the morning and go about the work of fighting racism and homophobia, defending the environment, organizing unions and tackling corporate hegemony. Sometimes they win--on the picket line, at ballot box, in the streets and outside the WTO meetings in Seattle.



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launch the war. "What I'm telling my colleagues in Congress and citizens is that we must continue to protest this illegal and unconstitutional war," argues Conyers. "The president has no authority to do what he's doing."

On the 11 House Democrats who voted against the "unequivocal support" resolution, eight were members of the Congressional Black Caucus: Conyers; Ohioan Stephanie Tubbs Jones; Californians Barbara Lee, Diane Watson and Maxine Waters; New Yorkers Charles Rangel and Edolphus Towns; and Virginian Bobby Scott. They were joined by California Democrats Mike Honda and Pete Stark, as well as Washington state's Jim McDermott.

Fifteen members of the CBC, including Lewis, CBC chair Elijah Cummings, D-Maryland, and CBC vice-chair Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Texas, voted present. They were joined by seven other House members, including leaders of the anti-war block in the Democratic caucus, such as Congressional Progressive Caucus co-chair Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio. In addition to Lewis, Cummings, Johnson and Kucinich, "present" votes came from California's Sam Farr; Florida's Corrine Brown; Indiana's Julia Carson; Missouri's William Clay Jr.; Maryland's Elijah Cummings; Illinois' Danny Davis, Jesse Jackson Jr., Bobby Rush and Jan Schakowsky; Michigan's Carolyn Kilpatrick; Minnesota's Martin Olav Sabo; New Jersey's Donald Payne; New York's Gregory Meeks and Major Owens; North Carolina's Mel Watt; Ohio's Sherrod Brown; and Texans Sheila Jackson-Lee and Lloyd Doggett. The single Republican to vote against the resolution was Texan Ron Paul.

The House members who opposed the resolution or voted "present" went out of their way to express sympathy for soldiers and their families. But many also expressed outrage at the determination of House Republican leaders, particularly Majority Leader Tom DeLay, D-Texas, to play politics with the matter.

California's Diane Watson, a former U.S. ambassador to Micronesia, summed up those sentiments after voting against the resolution.

, "As our troops endure the risks of battle in Iraq, we send to them our thoughts and prayers for their success and safe return. This is a time for all Americans to join in sending a clear message of support for our men and women in uniform," explained Watson. "That is why I am saddened and angered that the House Republican leaders would abuse an opportunity to show our troops support in order to make an overtly political statement. Rather than introduce a simple bill supporting our troops, House Republicans forced us to vote up or down on a resolution that endorses the President's mishandling of diplomacy and heedless march toward war."

Watson said Republicans "hijacked this resolution for their selfish political purposes."

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"I support the troops," she added. "But I will not be coerced into endorsing the President's failure to resolve the Iraq dispute peacefully. We are not at war because it is necessary. We are at war because the President failed to find a diplomatic solution to this problem."

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